

NEWS

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10 Indicted in International Human Smuggling Ring;
Young Honduran Women Forced to Work in Hudson County Bars

(More)

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NEWARK – Ten people were indicted today, all alleged members of a ring operating in the United States and Honduras that smuggled young, undocumented Honduran women into the U.S. and forced them to work off their smuggling debt in bars in Hudson County, U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Christie announced.

The women, mostly from rural, poor villages in Honduras – some as young as 14 – were recruited under the false promise of getting legitimate jobs as waitresses in restaurants in New Jersey. Once brought to Hudson County by way of a safehouse in Houston, Texas, however, they were put to work at several bars owned by the ringleader and subject to physical and emotional abuse, according to the Indictment.

The 31-count Indictment returned today describes, among other abuses, young victims being raped while smuggled to the United States; victims sometimes far younger than 21 forced to continually drink alcohol and dance with male customers at the bars to raise money to pay human smuggling fees of between \$10,000 and \$20,000; victims being beaten if they were not compliant; victims forced to work in the bars up to seven days a week from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m.; threats of deportation or harm to them and their families in Honduras if they did not comply with the ring's demands.

Young women who became pregnant were forced to terminate pregnancies to maintain them as income-producers for the ring, according to the Indictment. In one case, a 21-year-old victim was allegedly forced to take pills intended to induce a spontaneous abortion. The next day, the victim gave birth to a live baby girl, who died shortly afterward.

“This was inhumane and sadistic treatment of young women who were kept as virtual slaves,” said Christie. “These are among the most vile crimes I’ve seen in my time as U.S. Attorney, and we will bring the full weight of federal prosecution against these defendants.”

The Indictment charges the 10 individuals with violations of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (authored by Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey), including counts of conspiracy to commit forced labor, forced labor, alien smuggling and harboring illegal aliens. The Indictment supersedes and consolidates three earlier Indictments and adds two new defendants, including the suspected ringleader in Hudson County, Luisa Medrano, who was arrested last night along with Rosalba Ortiz, one of the ring's so-called “enforcers.” (All of the defendants, their charges, custody status and other pertinent information are listed in an addendum below.)

Medrano and Ortiz are scheduled to make initial appearances today at 2 p.m. before U.S. Magistrate Judge G. Donald Haneke.

Medrano, 50, of Cliffside Park, a U.S. citizen and native of El Salvador, is the owner of three bars in Union City and Guttenberg where the young women who were trafficked to Hudson County were put to work, according to the Indictment. Medrano also owned three multi-unit buildings in Union City, where the victims were allegedly forced to live while they worked to

pay off their smuggling debts. Included in the Indictment are two forfeiture counts, in which the government seeks to seize the buildings.

According to the Indictment, the ring employed recruiters in Honduras to locate attractive, innocent young woman – most in their teens and early 20s; used smugglers, commonly known as “coyotes,” to get them into the United States illegally, and “enforcers,” who advised the Honduran women upon arrival in New Jersey of the true nature of their work, that they were required to repay a smuggling fee of up to \$20,000 and then used physical abuse and intimidation to control and use them to make money for the conspirators. The young women received \$240 for approximately 48 hours of work per week plus an amount related to the sale of drinks to customers they met at the bars. But they were required to pay virtually all their earnings to the ring, at the rate of between \$250 and \$500 a week, according to the Indictment and earlier criminal Complaints.

The Indictment details circumstances of 10 victims. But in searches of two Hudson County apartments in January by agents from Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Inspector General, approximately 30 young women were arrested as illegal immigrants.

“This case illustrates ICE's commitment in identifying, investigating and prosecuting individuals who participate in the trafficking of human beings,” said Kyle Hutchins, Special Agent in Charge of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Newark. “These individuals are criminals, driven by greed, who act without conscience in their brazen disregard of human rights and freedoms.”

“The trafficking of human beings not only violates federal law but crosses the boundaries of human decency,” said Gordon S. Heddell, Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Labor. “My office will continue to work closely with other law enforcement agencies to combat those who bring illegal workers into this country.”

Three of those named in the Indictment are in custody in Honduras following their arrests there in early June. Honduran authorities have worked closely with U.S. law enforcement to bring all the ring's participants to justice. The Republic of Honduras, while it has an extradition treaty with the United States, does not typically extradite its own nationals. However, those individuals are now charged with alien smuggling in Honduras, and officials there expect to charge them with money laundering as well.

The victims, though illegal aliens, are receiving counseling, education and other social services provided by the U.S. government. All those referred to in the Indictment, as well as others originally arrested, have been qualified for special visas that will allow them to stay in the United States and become naturalized citizens. Their immediate families can join them and are eligible for the same status.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act was passed by Congress to combat human traffickers and the forms of coercion, such as physical and psychological intimidation, they use to hold their victims in conditions of servitude and forced labor.

Despite indictment, all defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

This case is the result of a continuing investigation by agents of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, SAC in Newark, under Special Agent in Charge Kyle Hutchins and the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Inspector General, under the direction of Inspector General Gordon S. Heddell, the Guttenberg Police Department, under the direction of Public Safety Director Nicholas Lordo; ICE Honduras Attache Luis M. Figueroa, ICE Investigator Alba R. Mejia, the General Prosecutor of the Republic of Honduras and the Special Investigation Police in Honduras.

The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Deborah J. Gannett and Camellia M. Valdes of the U.S. Attorney's Office in New Jersey, with assistance from the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, under the direction of Acting Assistant Attorney General Bradley J. Schlozman.

Individuals can report other cases of human trafficking or slavery to the Trafficking in Persons and Worker Exploitation Task Force complaint line, at 1-888-428-7581. Additional information about the Task Force can be found at: <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/crim/wetf.html>.

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Charged in the Superseding Indictment are:

The Ringleader

Luisa Medrano, 50, of Cliffside Park, a naturalized U.S. citizen and native of El Salvador, charged with one count of conspiracy to commit forced labor, eight counts of forced labor, one count of alien smuggling and eight counts of harboring illegal aliens. Medrano owns the bars where the girls were put to work: El Paisano Bar and Nightclub, at 509 22nd St., Union City, El Puerto de la Union I, at 6710 Bergenline Ave., Guttenberg, and El Puerto de la Union II, at 3806 Bergenline Ave., Union City. Medrano also owned the three apartment buildings at 509 22nd Street and 2604 New York Avenue, both in Union City, and 75 68th Street in Guttenberg.

The “Recruiters”

These defendants located pretty, young females from villages near Olanchito, Honduras, telling them they would be working in a restaurant in New Jersey. They allegedly handled them off to the smugglers. Those defendants are each charged in this Indictment as follows:

- **Lourdes Rosales Martinez**, 33, of Tejeras, Honduras, in custody in Honduras, charged with one count of conspiracy to commit forced labor; two counts of alien smuggling.
- **Zenia Zunilda Martinez**, 56, of Tejeras, Honduras, in custody in Honduras, charged with one count of conspiracy; four counts of alien smuggling.
- **Nancy Floridalma Rosales Martinez**, 34, of Olanchito, Honduras, in custody in Honduras, charged with one count of conspiracy; four counts of forced labor; 10 counts of alien smuggling, and four counts of harboring illegal aliens.

The Smugglers or “Coyotes”

- **Jose Arnaldo Isuala-Meza**, 23, of Sonaguera, Honduras (among others not named in the Indictment). The alleged lead “coyote,” he smuggled groups of Honduran girls to the U.S.-Mexico border. While traveling with the girls, Isuala-Meza allegedly raped some of them, and, in at least one instance, left a 14-year-old alone in the Mexican desert, when she scratched him and fought while she was being raped. Isuala-Meza is being sought in Honduras. He is charged with one count of conspiracy and seven counts of alien smuggling.
- **Elsa Consuelo Isuala-Meza**, 44, of Houston, Texas (Jose Isuala’s sister), met some of the girls in Houston and arranged for their transportation to the New York area. An arrest warrant is outstanding for Isuala-Meza; she is charged with one count of conspiracy; seven counts of alien smuggling and two counts of harboring illegal aliens.

The “Enforcers”

These defendants imposed the rules and work on the victims, collected smuggling fees and were responsible for much of the abuse as described in the Indictment.

- **Noris Elvira Rosales Martinez**, 29, of Union City, arrested in February 2005 in Tennessee, remains in custody. She is charged in the Indictment with one count of conspiracy, 10 counts of forced labor, seven counts of alien smuggling and 10 counts of harboring illegal aliens.
- **Ana Luz Rosales Martinez**, 37, of Union City, arrested in January 2005 in New Jersey, remains in custody. She is charged in the Indictment with one count of conspiracy, nine counts of forced labor and seven counts of harboring illegal aliens.

- **Jose Dimas Magana**, 40, of Union City, arrested in February 2005 in Pennsylvania, remains in custody. He is charged in the Indictment with one count of conspiracy, 10 counts of forced labor, four counts of alien smuggling and 10 counts of harboring illegal aliens.
- **Rosalba Ortiz**, 34, of Union City, arrested today. Ortiz is charged in the Indictment with one count of conspiracy, six counts of forced labor and four counts of harboring illegal aliens.

Charges and Penalties

Count One: Conspiracy to Commit Forced Labor Offenses, which carries a maximum penalty of 5 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Counts Two through Eleven: Forced Labor, which carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Counts 12 through Twenty-One: Alien Smuggling, which carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Counts 22 through Thirty-One: Harboring Illegal Aliens, which carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

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